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SUBJECT: Overall Success and Room for Improvement in Refugee Assistance Projects in Northern Afghanistan

REF:

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a visit to Kunduz, Baghlan, and Takhar provinces from November 11-14, the Refugee Section found most FY06 projects well-done and FY07 projects underway. The programs are vital to refugee reintegration and fill a critical need. In some cases, they represent the only visible sign of post-war reconstruction. Overall, the projects get good marks but we need to increase our monitoring and fine-tune the beneficiary selection processes to optimize return on our investment. Corruption in the land allocation program has led to land speculation, construction of shelters for unqualified beneficiaries, and marginalization of some desperately poor people. Some educational programs seem to focus on quantity over quality. We will communicate our findings to the relevant NGOs' Kabul headquarters, share best practices with our implementing partners, and conduct more unannounced monitoring and evaluation of these projects.

The Target Beneficiaries: Recently Returned Vulnerable Families

¶2. (SBU) Funding from the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) targets Afghan refugees who recently returned from Pakistan, Iran, or other countries of refuge. PRM funds internally displaced persons (IDPs) but only indirectly through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Northern Afghanistan has seen an increase in both returnee and IDP resettlement, particularly in Kunduz, which UNHCR claims has the country's fifth highest rate of return. Most returnees are Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Pashtuns, most of whom said they returned two to three years ago because they loved their homeland and wanted to come back despite the hardships. Many have seen plenty. Most families depend on unskilled day labor, share cropping, and minor animal husbandry for survival. They often have little to no access to potable water, health care, education, or steady employment. They have lived with relatives, in ramshackle mud shelters, or in the case of some IDPs in Baghlan province last winter, in holes dug in the ground and covered with plastic sheeting. While these provinces are relatively fertile, the environment is harsh. We conducted our Takhar monitoring in a massive dust storm that grounded planes in a nearby Samangan province, closed schools and shops, and reportedly caused the death of a child. Even the most basic shelter can mean the difference between life and death.

Christian Children's Fund (CCF) Operates Good Education

¶13. (SBU) CCF completed education and water projects in Kunduz and Takhar provinces with FY06 funds and has started similar programs with FY07 funds. We watched a rickety but effective well drilling rig at work in Kunduz, and saw new wells in Takhar that children could operate. We also visited a sturdy two-room shelter CCF had built for UNHCR with steel beams and a latrine outside. But as UNHCR is increasingly seeing, the family expanded the central hallway for more room, which may decrease the seismic stability. Most families spent \$200-\$600 of their own funds to build the shelters, along with their sweat equity. No one with whom we spoke went into debt, as some Australian officials have alleged.

¶14. (SBU) CCF's literacy programs in Kunduz and Takhar were in full swing when we arrived on our pre-arranged tour. Each child or woman had a book and seemed eager to learn. Most, if not all, were the first in their families to learn to read, and for many women and girls, this is the only education they will ever receive. Overall, the projects are proceeding well despite sometimes conflicting or restrictive cultural practices. Several children could not write their names after two years in the program; many leave during harvest season to help their parents. We were concerned that the literacy program siphoned off children from the regular school, but many parents, citing security and kidnapping concerns, would not allow their children, especially girls, to walk the 2.5 kilometers to school. Married Uzbek women in the Takhar literacy program said their husbands wanted them to learn to read so that they could get jobs and earn money, but they were not allowed to attend the male-taught classes at the government school. They asked us to fund female teachers, but CCF said all the female candidates whom the school tried to recruit were not allowed to travel to this remote

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area alone or without their husbands, especially for the meager \$60/month salary.

¶15. (SBU) CCF received FY06 funds to build two schools, but the construction of one school according to the new GoIRoA school design absorbed the majority of the funding. The new school, located in a remote corner of Takhar province, was truly outstanding. The large concrete building held big, furnished classrooms and even a teachers' lounge. With the leftover funds, CCF refurbished four schools; we visited one in Kunduz with a new CCF-funded perimeter wall. The three-year old, Korean-built 11-room school, however, was already crumbling, and many of the 2,300 students studied in four ragged UNICEF tents and six small huts in the inner courtyard. (We confirmed that 714 girls and 1586 boys attended in two shifts.) We questioned why CCF did not build more classrooms instead of a wall and were told that parents would not let their daughters attend unless a secure wall was built around the outer courtyard that housed the latrine.

ACTED Shelter Project at the Land Allocation Scheme
LAS) Site in Baghlan: Many Hard Lessons Learned

¶16. (SBU) Despite the best intentions and excellent work of our implementing partner, the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), the well-located Baghlan site is almost a ghost town. Whether from a lack of a real need or from a real lack of complementary services, only 100 out of 747 ACTED-built shelters are occupied, and 3 out of 36 UNHCR-built shelters. This pilot project has generated many hard lessons and provided a wake-up call to the international community that greater oversight is needed. The project is salvageable but will take strong political will and commitment.

¶17. (SBU) Due to security concerns, the Refugee Coordinator did not accompany the Afghan LES Refugee Specialist to Baghlan. The Refugee Specialist, however, met with male and female shuras, government and NGO officials, and inspected the beautiful new clinic and well-constructed shelters. ACTED has a good reputation and long history of work in Afghanistan, and has built 747 PRM-funded shelters at the site (out of 840 planned), along with 3.5 kilometers

of road and 40 wells. ACTED also runs community development and conflict resolution programs, which are vital in these mixed-ethnicity communities.

¶18. (SBU) The Baghlan site is a GoIRoA Land Allocation Scheme site, where the Afghan government provides a 600 square meter plot for poor returnee and IDP families. The international community then funds shelter construction for the most vulnerable of these families. There is evidence that the GoIRoA-run land allocation beneficiary selection process was rife with corruption. The former Department of Refugees and Repatriation (DORR) chief allegedly circumvented the official Beneficiary Selection Committee and drew up a beneficiary list that included police, shopkeepers, the deputy Governor, MPs, provincial and central government department heads, and, according to some claims, even a cousin of President Karzai. Land speculation was rampant, as the nominal price the beneficiaries paid for the land (9000 Afghanis (\$180) per plot or 1500 Afghanis (\$30) per square meter) is vastly below market prices. Reports surfaced that even local ACTED and UNHCR staff had plots, and some people own 20-30 plots. Many families and even whole villages had to pay bribes to be selected as beneficiaries. The Kuchi families who could not pay the bribe lived in deplorable conditions next to the site for three years without receiving any land.

¶19. In the end, DORR allocated 3,000 plots. ACTED and UNHCR -- whose expatriate project managers underestimated the scale of the corruption -- then provided shelters to the most vulnerable families among the selected plot allocation beneficiaries. Before long, these "vulnerable" beneficiaries were modifying the shelters with high compound walls, fancy gates and individual wells, all of which cost as much as the \$1,000 shelter. We heard reports of plots and shelters being sold for anywhere from 50,000 Afghanis (\$1,000) to \$300,000 (\$6,000) depending on the plot location. (Sale is illegal; beneficiaries are supposed to live in their shelters for five years before selling them.) The good news is that the new DORR chief, working through the newly-engaged Beneficiary Selection Committee,

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reevaluated the eligibility criteria of 1,000 land allocation beneficiaries and rejected 900 of them. He said he was able to do this due to the "support of his tribe and 14 educated brothers," but he wants a high-level MORR letter supporting the next phase: physical redistribution of the plots to new beneficiaries. While this process will hopefully chill land speculation and target truly vulnerable people, redistribution could be drawn-out and even dangerous. The DORR chief faces enormous pressure to do nothing and is considering taking another job.

¶10. (SBU) The Baghlan site has enormous potential but all parties now realize that shelter construction is pointless in areas without concomitant social services. The site currently lacks livelihood projects, reliable water, and transportation into Pul-e-Khumri, which is only eight kilometers away on the major highway. A bus service to town began a few months ago but lasted only three days after local taxi drivers paid the bus driver to claim he had no riders. The driver kept the fares, the local Department of Transportation discontinued the bus service, and now, instead of paying the 5 Afghani bus fare (10 cents), residents must pay several dollars each way. Since most residents make only two or three dollars a day as unskilled laborers, many cannot break even after paying their transportation costs. One family left because "they starved for three days," another because a family member died of exposure over the winter. Other beneficiaries moved back to town, and their shelters collapsed when last winter's snowfall piled up on their roofs. Project residents were supposed to be employed by the Hungarian PRT-funded brick factory but the \$150/month salary they were promised (and the free bricks for vulnerable families) never materialized. Instead, residents were offered (and they refused) \$2.50/day and no transportation to the factory three kilometers away. (Note: UNHCR felt that some of these families had a "refugee camp" attitude, developed after years of dependency in Pakistani camps where aid organizations provided extensive services at their doorsteps. End note.) All these issues underscore that land allocation sites need holistic development that incorporates shelter and services if they are to become viable "pull factors" for Afghan refugees considering repatriation.

**Shelter for Life Strengthens Communities with Bridges
and Shelters in Takhar Province**

¶11. (SBU) Shelter for Life (SFL) built bridges and shelters in several districts in under-served Takhar province, which is still studded with rusty Soviet tanks and charred personnel carriers. Beneficiaries spoke warmly of SFL and proudly showed us the six sturdy bridges they built in a Cash-For-Work program. Village residents said that cars routinely fell off the wooden bridges into the canal, and they had to load and unload donkeys to get over each crossing. (To reach this area, we drove through a wide river and marsh that will be impassable after the winter rains.) Along with the bridges, the SFL shelters were well-built and completed on schedule, although the tour included only the shelters SFL selected.

While we found no blatant corruption, we did find many of the residents were IDPs, and not refugees. We also saw many shelters with few belongings, or being used primarily for storage. (One family used the latrine for storage, and another stored their onion harvest in the shelter.) We doubled-back on our own to a shelter we had visited that morning and found only a small girl who said the family "had gone to the other house."

¶12. (SBU) We are concerned that beneficiaries either do not need their shelters or did not qualify in the first place. We examined SFL's beneficiary applications and found their interview process to be thorough but highly subjective. Beneficiaries are also confirmed by the local shura council but that too can be subject to "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" when it comes to designating family and tribal members to receive plots. These projects highlight the difficulty in working with an opaque tribal culture such as in Afghanistan. SFL has worked in Takhar for many years and probably has the most experience in targeting vulnerable people, and even they have most likely included non-eligible people in their beneficiary selection.

¶13. (SBU) Our implementing partners, for the most part, are meeting their project objectives and indicators, but we need a more

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transparent LAS program beneficiary selection process, with greater oversight and follow-up. UNHCR is considering taking the land allocation process away from provincial DORR offices, which will undermine capacity-building goals but help ensure the right people receive assistance. It is a delicate balance; too aggressive an effort could threaten UN and NGO staff security and jeopardize their continued involvement with the project. We are holding a strategy meeting with UNHCR and donors on November 24 to discuss reforming the land allocation program in light of the pilot project experiences. UNHCR and the donor community agree that, while flawed, these programs are important and still worth pursuing -- and thus worth improving.